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Republican Defection: It All Began in October...

The intensity of the Republican stampede against President Nixon can be traced to last Oct. 31 when Gen. Alexander Haig went to Capitol Hill with soothing reassurance for the party's Senate leaders—clearly one of the worst of the infinite Watergate miscalculations at the White House.

On that day, White House chief of staff Haig told worried Republicans that the tape of the President's fateful March 21, 1973, conversation with John W. Dean III would prove this was Mr. Nixon's first knowledge of the Watergate cover-up. It is "exculpatory," said Haig. Similar assurances were given key congressional Republicans by Haig during the next few weeks. From them stemmed Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott's resounding defenses of Mr. Nixon and less stentorian declarations from lesser Republicans.

Neither Scott nor the others accuse Haig of deception. They suspect, in fact, that Haig himself was misled. But these Republicans are livid, not only over the contents of the transcripts but because they feel like dupes.

An example is this private remark by one Republican leader: "I campaigned up and down my state all winter proclaiming Nixon's innocence of what I was told about that March 21 tape." Such fury has created an unbridgeable chasm between Republicans and their President, converting his defense from political to narrowly legal.

This possibly fatal White House miscalculation seems based less on a naive misreading of the transcripts than on an underlying belief in the Nixon inner circle that they *would never be read by Congress.*

That is certainly the best explanation for testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee last July 30 by former Nixon lieutenant H. R. Haldeman. Based on personally listening to and taking notes on the March 21 tape, Haldeman swore that Mr. Nixon said "it would be wrong" to raise $1 million in hush money—testimony that resulted in his perjury indictment. In an Aug. 22 press conference, Mr. Nixon generally confirmed Haldeman's version.

Even after Mr. Nixon agreed Oct. 23 to surrender the March 21 tape to the grand jury, White House aides thought it never would reach Congress. That was the situation Oct. 31 when Haig traveled to Capitol Hill to reassure worried Senate Republican leaders. When he told them the tapes showed Mr. Nixon first learned on March 21 of White House involvement in Watergate, Scott was elated.

Scott's elation soared when he was later shown a transcript and quickly scanned it. Another key Senate Republican was told by Haig on three occasions that the March 21 transcript would "exculpate" the President. Although few defended the President so loudy as Scott, many publicly declared Mr. Nixon would be redeemed if only he would release the tapes.

Not until the House impeachment proceeding raised the possibility that Congress might get the tapes did Mr. Nixon, in a Feb. 25 press conference, change his tune about the March 21 hush-money conversation. But never did the White House warn these Republicans to hedge their bets even a little.

Thus, Mr. Nixon's announcement April 29 of the release of the transcripts brought sighs of relief. By May 1, however, Scott was growing nervous. He and his staff huddled for three hours before issuing a one-page statement reaffirming his confidence in Mr. Nixon.

It was not until the following weekend that Scott and other Republicans got down to serious reading. They learned that Mr. Nixon was informed of White House involvement in Watergate *before* March 21 and that he by no means ruled out hush money on that occasion. Scott was aghast to find he had not seen the second of two Nixon-Dean conversations of March 21.

Haig, who to this day has never personally heard the tapes, is not blamed personally ("I think Al is a victim as much as we were," says one senator). Aiming their anger at the President and his lawyers, the Republican defection then began rolling with Scott's harsh statement of May 7. During the next 48 hours, three prestigious groups of Republican congressmen—the S.O.S. Club, the Wednesday Group and the Chowder and Marching Society—met to privately echo Scott's public statement. Mr. Nixon was politically finished in the House.

The White House, fully aware of this, now must rely on James St. Clair to save Mr. Nixon on grounds he committed no impeachable offense. That leaves the President's efforts to woo Capitol Hill Republicans at a bitter impasse.

House Republican leaders may decide this week to send a delegation to Mr. Nixon, but all agree a request that he resign would be rejected—underlining their impotency. Presidential aides confide Mr. Nixon will not resign if only because he wants to force "weak-kneed" Republican congressmen to cast the politically dangerous vote on impeachment. The trail that began Oct. 31 in naive hope is ending in anger, resentment and vindictiveness.

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